

**STATEMENT OF**

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**BEFORE THE**

**TRANSPORTATION SECURITY AND INFRASTRUCTURE  
PROTECTION SUBCOMMITTEE**

**HOUSE COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY**

**ON**

**AVIATION SECURITY PART II:  
A FRONTLINE PERSPECTIVE ON THE NEED FOR ENHANCED  
HUMAN RESOURCES AND EQUIPMENT**

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Madam Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee: My name is John Gage, and I am the National President of the American Federation of Government Employees, AFL-CIO (AFGE), which represents over 600,000 federal government workers, including Transportation Security Officers (TSOs) at airports across the United States. I welcome the opportunity to convey to you the concerns about training that have been a priority issue for our TSO membership since those jobs were federalized over five years ago. Many times I have testified before Congress about the frustrations our TSO members deal with every day as they do everything that they can to keep the flying public safe. I have also testified time and again of their dedication to doing the best possible job they can to thwart air terrorism, even as they are wrongfully denied the fundamental collective bargaining rights and labor protections of other Department of Homeland Security (DHS) workers. The apparent consensus among AFGE's TSO membership is that the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) has made many critical decisions that have created or exacerbated obstacles to the ability of TSOs to carry out their duties, including the availability and quality of training.

The Aviation Transportation Security Act (ATSA) mandated that TSOs receive 40 hours of classroom instruction and 60 hours of on-the-job training before they begin to perform screening duties. After hire, ATSA requires that incumbent TSOs receive 3 hours of training per week averaged over a fiscal quarter. TSOs are also required to pass proficiency tests each year. TSA is required by law to provide remedial training to TSOs who do not pass the proficiency tests. The Government Accountability Office (GAO) described that at least one of the 3 hours is "to be devoted to X-ray image interpretation and the other 2 hours to screening techniques, review of standard operating procedures, or other mandatory administrative training, such as ethics and privacy act training."<sup>1</sup> Our TSO members have reported to AFGE that other than the training they received prior to beginning their jobs screening passengers and baggage, TSA has consistently failed to provide the training they are required to provide under ATSA.

TSOs must deal with the consequences of decisions made by TSA management, from policy decisions made at TSA headquarters, to personnel and scheduling decisions made by the airports' Federal Security Directors (FSD). In summary, TSOs point to chronic understaffing at airports, the lack of relevance and low quality of training TSA provides, TSA's failure to fully invest in technology to facilitate the ability of TSOs to evaluate potential threats to aviation travel, and TSA's institutional disdain for comments and suggestions from TSOs—who stand on the frontlines of air security—that can help spot and prevent threats to air travel.

### **TSO Shortages**

TSA has adopted a staffing model that it calls its Staffing Allocation Model, or SAM. Under the current SAM, TSA's goal is for airports to have a ratio of 80% full-time TSOs and 20% part-time TSOs. SAM does not adequately take into account

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<sup>1</sup> GAO-05-457, Aviation Security: Screener Training and Performance Measurement Strengthened, but More Work Remains.

the statutorily-mandated training time TSOs are required to complete or other collateral duties TSOs may be assigned, such as administrative work. Instead, according to the GAO February 2007 report to Congress on TSA's staffing model, SAM assumes staffing levels that "allow most passengers on most days to experience 10 minutes or less wait time," and "that training is relegated to times when there is surplus staffing and should occur during 'less busy times.'" In other words, rather than construct a model that specifically allows times for TSOs to receive the training they are required to have under law, much less time to master new Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and technology, this important task is relegated to whatever time is left, even if that time is none at all. FSDs have consistently reported to GAO and TSA that because of insufficient TSO staffing, TSOs have difficulty in meeting the recurrent training requirement within regular duty hours.

SAM also does not take into account the effect of the incredibly high TSO attrition rate on its staffing assumptions. The first eight months of 2007 resulted in a TSO attrition rate of 19.6%, much higher than the current 2.2% attrition rate of the federal workforce. The recent spate of largely cosmetic TSA personnel policy changes have not provided the sort of meaningful change required to maintain the current, dedicated TSO workforce. Since January, 151 TSOs have left Boston Logan, one of the nation's largest and busiest airports. AFGE's TSO members report that at many airports the priority of FSDs is to provide training for new hires and part-time staff at a cost of \$10,000 per hire. Training for full-time TSOs is an afterthought. The recently enacted 9-11 Commission Report Act lifted the artificial and arbitrary cap on TSOs. TSA should simply request from Congress funding to fully staff its TSO workforce at every airport. The FSD should establish personnel schedules at each airport that include accommodations for every TSO to receive the training required by law while on duty, and also provide opportunities for TSOs to receive training on new screening technologies.

In addition, TSA can do much to retain and invest in the current full time TSO workforce by dropping its opposition to collective bargaining rights and labor protections for TSOs, by treating them the same as other workers in DHS and the federal workforce. By restoring fundamental fairness to the workplace and addressing those important work-life issues that are pivotal to workers, including training, TSOs will be able to perform with confidence and learn new skills that could lead to promotions and improve safety.

### **Quality of Training**

**Online Training** - Much of the training TSOs currently receive is self-taught using on-line resources, or is conducted in the Online Learning Center that provides self-guided training courses. Although initially TSOs reported that there were some airports that lacked access to the high-speed internet capabilities required to run the programs on computers, TSOs now report that at the very least the equipment is available. However, TSOs also report that many of the programs they train on are several years old.

Occasionally a Training Instructor (TI) is present, but is relegated to being more of a monitor who can answer questions, and does not provide instructions or elaborate on the online training program. In fact, one TSO told AFGE that he had not participated in a training session led by a TI in over two years.

AFGE's TSO members at several airports have also raised concerns about the qualifications of some TIs. TSOs state that they are aware of individuals who were chosen for the position of TI, but saw no evidence that they were given any sort of training for the job. Multiple TSOs reported that as with other promotions or desirable jobs within TSA at airports, the choices for TI were based on favoritism over merit with friendships, cronyism, and cliques taking priority over training or experience. According to several TSOs, those chosen by TSA management for TI positions had no apparent qualifications for the job, and were chosen over other TSOs who had backgrounds in security, law enforcement, and the military or had previous teaching or instructional experience. Many of AFGE's TSO members came to TSA with those backgrounds, and a belief that their previous experience would be an asset in this country's war against terrorism. Not only is TSA's current policy of favoritism over merit taking its toll on the TSO workforce morale, it is also depriving both TSA and the flying public of the full utilization of all available assets.

**“Hands-On” Training** – There is no substitute for practical, hands-on experience. This is especially true when it comes to the operation of the X-ray and scanning equipment currently in use at airports. Many TSOs report that they have participated in Threat Image Projection (TIP) where TSOs are required to detect images projected on an X-ray monitor. TSOs consistently report that TIP and other practical training are found mostly at the passenger checkpoint. Despite the fact that TSOs assigned to baggage screening use X-ray and scanning machines just as their colleagues on passenger checkpoint, they are much less likely to receive training on the machines they use everyday. Once again, due to incredibly high turnover rates, at some airports, new hires are the only TSOs who receive hands-on training.

There are striking inconsistencies in the availability and quality in training from airport to airport. One example would be the training offered by Bomb Appraisal Officers (BAO). BAOs are deployed at airports and are specifically trained in the detection of explosives. At several airports TSOs report that the BAO regularly visits both checkpoint and baggage screening and that the BAO occasionally builds a simulated Improvised Explosive Device (IED) and runs it through the checkpoint to see if TSOs can spot the components. At another airport TSOs state that at least twice in the last five years the BAO has conducted a training where TSOs built their own simulated IED and tested each other by running it through the X-ray machine. This type of hands-on experience is invaluable. Yet, despite the obvious merits of BAO training to the TSO workforce, at other airports TSOs state that while they are aware that there is a BAO assigned to their airport, the person does not conduct trainings for the TSO workforce.

### **Investment in Technology**

Over the past few weeks there have been media articles referring to the leak of a classified TSA report that found a high percentage of simulated explosives and bomb parts that were missed by TSOs at three large airports. AFGE does not accept the leaked results as evidence that TSOs are doing anything other than a very good job protecting the flying public under very difficult conditions. The reported test results are not, in and of themselves, indicative of individual TSO or TSO workforce performance. The report should, however, be used as an early warning signal of problems that need to be resolved as quickly as possible.

The specific tests were covert where testers attempted to slip simulated explosives and bomb parts past passenger checkpoints. Unlike the covert tests of several years ago that involved the detection of fully assembled simulated bombs, these tests often involved very small components that are easily hidden in items that TSA has chosen not to ban. AFGE TSO members report that even in trainings where TSOs themselves disassembled a simulated explosive and hid its parts in carry-on baggage, they were unable to find the parts by sight alone. Simply put, TSOs cannot be expected to detect what the human eye cannot see.

The technology that would enable TSOs to detect potential weapons not readily apparent to the human eye is available, and is currently in use at three airports. According to published reports, TSA has purchased 20 of the machines and plans to test them at other airports over the next few months. For years, in report after report, both GAO and the DHS Inspector General have called on TSA to invest in and deploy technology that will assist TSOs in performing their screening duties in response to the ever-changing efforts of determined terrorists. In a February 2007 report to Congress, GAO wrote, "TSA does not yet have a strategic plan to guide its efforts to acquire and deploy screening technologies."<sup>2</sup> In an October follow-up discussion of the issue, GAO found that TSA "generally" did not achieve the goal of deploying checkpoint technologies to address vulnerabilities.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, it should be noted that TSA has put tremendous emphasis on "customer satisfaction". The customer could be either the carriers who want their planes to depart on schedule, or the flying public, who want to get through the screening checkpoint and on the way to their gate as quickly as possible. In fact, the goal of TSA (according to SAM) is to "provide the necessary level of aviation security and ensure that the average aviation security related delay experienced by passengers is minimized".<sup>4</sup> The reality is that there are many sources of delay to air travelers, including highway traffic, long lines at tickets counters and the sheer volume of passengers. All too often though, the blame for passenger delay is assigned to the checkpoint screening process. Although a goal of screening is to move passengers along as quickly as possible, it is not the only goal. TSOs report that they fear they may

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<sup>2</sup> GAO-07-448T, Aviation Security: Progress Made in Systematic Planning to Guide Key Investment Decisions, but More Work Remains.

<sup>3</sup> GAO-08-139T, Aviation Security: DHS Has Made Progress in Securing the Commercial Aviation System, but Key Challenges Remain.

<sup>4</sup> GAO-07-299, Aviation Security: TSA's Staffing Allocation Model is Useful for Allocating Staff among Airports, but Its Assumptions Should be Systematically Reassessed.

miss items that should receive additional scrutiny because they are under constant pressure to work quickly—at times, too quickly. TSA management should work with TSOs to test technology and develop protocols that keep the public safe while meeting the needs of passengers.

### **Lack of TSO Input**

AFGE TSO members report that they have yet to feel that are a partner working with TSA to ensure aviation safety. According to the 2006 Federal Human Capital Survey, 54% of the TSA workforce, overwhelming comprised of TSOs stated that creativity and innovation are not rewarded at TSA and only 38% of the workforce believed they had “sufficient resources” to do their jobs. Half of TSA workers report they do not have “a feeling of personal empowerment” regarding work processes. Too often TSOs report they were laughed at by supervisors when they requested additional training. At many airports, speaking up about an alternative process or pointing out a problem was a certain path to retaliation, which could include either actual termination or harassing the worker until they quit. This attitude among TSA management runs counter to the mission of the agency by ignoring or discounting the input of over 43,000 TSOs on the frontlines of safety every day at 450 airports across the country.

TSOs have implemented SOPs that sometimes change on a daily basis. As the “face” of TSA, they have to listen to passenger complaints about removing their shoes, emptying containers, removing laptops from cases, as well as complaints from parents who don’t want to take their babies out of strollers to proceed through the detectors. When a new SOP is communicated by management, TSOs must almost instantly grasp and implement it. Too often TSOs state that they receive no or incomplete feedback from supervisors as to whether their implementation is correct or not.

There should be a true and respectful discourse between TSA management and TSOs. No worker at DHS should be hesitant to point out a shortcoming that could impact public safety because they fear retaliation from management. This is a very real threat to the TSO workforce, because TSA refuses to be bound by the Office of Special Counsel’s recommendations when TSOs are retaliated against for blowing the whistle on security breaches. TSOs do not have the right to appeal serious harmful personnel decisions to the Merit Systems Protection Board—even though their managers have that right. AFGE calls on Congress to pass H.R. 3212, a bill introduced by Representative Nita Lowey that would provide TSOs collective bargaining rights and workplace protections and ensure that they are treated the same as other workers at TSA.

The availability and level of training and deployment of technology is incredibly inconsistent among our nation’s airports. Given the resources necessary to get the job done quickly and effectively, and with valuable input from the TSOs doing the tough job of keeping the public safe, TSA can further accomplish its mission.

This concludes my statement. I would be happy to take questions from the Subcommittee.